

# Homelessness

People lose their homes for a variety of reasons: floods, fires, divorce, health problems, the loss of a job, the death of a spouse, accidents, poor financial decisions, and sometimes chemical addiction. Thanks to the recession, foreclosures are almost epidemic.

Signs that say *house-for-sale*, or *apartment-for-rent*, tell nothing about the reasons for their vacancies.

About a third of our homeless population are just people who have fallen on hard times. Another third are afflicted with mental illnesses who were discharged into the community because of funding cuts. The final third suffer from chemical addiction, usually alcohol.

Many of the homeless are families with children struggling to survive. A quarter of these families have employment income that is too low to afford decent housing. 40% of family adults claim that abuse or the threat of violence contributed to their being homeless. 88% are headed by single females.

In 2010, Connecticut shelters served 11,700 people, including 1,500 children and 1,300 homeless youths between the ages of 18-24. These figures, bad as they are, only reflect the number of people that our shelters could accommodate – not those living on the streets or in abandoned buildings. It is estimated that an astonishing 40,000 people are not technically homeless because they *double up*, staying with friends or families.

One might think that the sheer quantity of homeless people would provoke a strong social response. Unfortunately, our response seems quite the opposite. The occasional exposé on homelessness is overshadowed by the media's fascination with celebrities and gossip. In the meantime, partisan bickering does more to sustain the problems than fix them. Less noticeable are lobbyists who work behind the scenes to manipulate our priorities away from thoughtful compassion.

Some religious and non-profit groups do their best to provide direct services to the poor and homeless. Local and state agencies also supply necessary aid.

Nevertheless, the root cause of these problems is not easily approached. It is engrained in our culture. If we want to repair it, we have to do so ourselves.

For the most part, in Essex, we don't see homeless people living on the streets or under bridges. We assume that others are doing well as long we are doing well. When we hear noise about the recession and long-term unemployment, it seems distant unless we experience it first hand. From our limited perspective, it might appear that we have no local poverty at all.

This is an illusion of course. People are people, each bearing their own set of problems. By the time they come to the local social services office for help, they are usually deep in trouble.

Some of the people I work with slide closer to homelessness everyday. A number of them are talented, educated, and have worked all their lives. Some are selling their possessions to pay their rent or mortgage. Some use credit cards. Many cling to a state of denial, waiting for a miracle.

It used to be that I could count on such people eventually finding a job. That's not happening so readily today. The number of job openings are simply not there. Some of my clientele are in their mid- to late-50s with valuable experience. Without training in the latest technologies, however, the job market has little use for them. To make things worse, some were self-employed and never contributed to Social Security or made other provisions for retirement. Those who did contribute to Social Security now find their projected benefits shrinking with every year that they are underemployed.

Waiting for the market to turn things around is no longer realistic. We may be facing a new wave of homelessness for which we are not prepared.

We need more shelters, supportive housing units and affordable rents. On top of that, however, we need ***a new paradigm of prevention***. We can blame political partisanship for not taking problems more seriously, or businesses for not hiring, or for sending jobs overseas – but these are symptoms of a less visible fault-line that is deeply engrained in our society. The only way to fix things is for all of us to make more responsible decisions in our private, public and

professional lives – and be accountable when we do not. Until we do that, social progress will remain fundamentally insufficient.

The way we start is by re-establishing **priorities of conscience**. Conscience is where the appeal for social justice comes from, as well as the philanthropic urge to champion those in need. It should come as no surprise that when we respond to our moral obligations toward others, we also find ourselves most satisfyingly human.

Some might disregard this as unrealistic. The call for public conscience can never be as tangible as a bricks and mortar program with a serious budget.

When we consider what a permeating **lack of conscience** produces, however, the value becomes clear. We get inadequate social policies that do more to sustain poverty rather than alleviate it. Thanks to political or bureaucratic decisions, good programs are cut, underfunded and understaffed. When times are bad and assistance programs are most needed, they are first on the chopping block.

A lack of conscience contributes to homelessness in more direct ways also. Domestic abuse and economically depressing employment practices are major causes that lead to a host of other problems.

As individuals, how do we encourage priorities of conscience?

We start by being more conscious of the needs of others, and how our everyday words and actions either contribute to the solution or the problem. We can speak out more from the heart and less from calculations of profit. We can take the ethical lessons we learn from our faith traditions more seriously, and stop thinking only of ourselves. We can refuse to partake in values that are questionable or contradictory. We can take the heroic path and help those in need when possible.

The answers are based on a simple concept: If enough people care enough to do enough, the world automatically becomes a better place to live.